

The Humorous But Hungry River Otter

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Ron Singer/U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



The river otter, *Lutra canadensis*, is probably the most playful member of the family *Mustelidae*. These animals seem to enjoy making a game of all activities. This family is also widely known for its ability to discharge scent from anal glands.

The river otter is found throughout all of Alabama, from the hilly regions of the north to the coastal marshes of extreme south Alabama. We naturally associate otter populations with aquatic habitats: rivers, creeks, ponds, and swamps are some of the areas to find these critters. However, a fact not widely known is that otters also inhabit marine environments, so locating an otter along our coastal marsh area is a distinct possibility. They prefer an unpolluted drainage and minimal human contact. Although normally aquatic creatures, otters will travel many miles over land to find other suitable habitats.

Otters are powerful swimmers, propelled through the water by webbed hind feet. Their keen ability to move acrobatically in the water is a result of a torpedo-shaped body and a long, muscular tail. Otters can stay submerged up to eight minutes. They are primarily nocturnal, which accounts for people locating otter signs, but not the animal itself. They are active during daylight however, in areas that are undisturbed. About one-half of an otter's life is spent sleeping. Feeding and social play also account for a high percentage of an otter's life. Both adult

and young appear to enjoy these times of activity. Wrestling, dunking, playing hide and seek, and mud sliding are favorite activities noted in these interesting animals. The vocalization of otters can best be described as growls, whines, and chirps.

River otters are solitary animals but are at times found in family groups. The otter is sexually mature at two years of age. Breeding season occurs in late winter to early spring. Like other members of the family *Mustelidae*, they exhibit delayed implantation of fertilized eggs. After a period of arrested development, the egg implants in the uterine wall and normal development occurs. The average litter is two. The mother cares for the young, which are born blind and helpless. Around six months of age, the family unit is broken and the young move on, looking for territory to call home.

These animals use "toilets," a specific area where the animal defecates. A common site in otter territory is small piles of mud and debris. These "scent mounds" are normally the recipient of urine and scent. This action aids in territorial marking.

As one would expect, the primary diet of otters is fish, although location of habitat does play an important role in what is consumed. Cray-

fish, snails, mussels, reptiles, amphibians, and insects can be part of their diet. Mammals, waterfowl, and vegetable matter is also taken but to a lesser degree. Along the coast, an otter's diet will include crabs, shrimp, and other marine life.

Since fish make up a high percentage of an otter's diet, their presence in or around any commercial fish operation should cause concern. A little detective work, such as examination of an otter "toilet" will reveal clues about what has recently been consumed. If problems occur, there are non-lethal methods available to control river otters.

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